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The Trump Campaign Computational Propaganda Challenge for the Indian Parliamentary Elections 2019

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Digital technology tools like any computerized system have a viral tendency and what awaits the Indian Elections in 2019 is a Trump style sophisticated digital computational propaganda. Such tools are emerging as threats to democracies, especially like India, with a free media and a booming population, connecting to the web through smart hand-held devices, increasingly relying on social media for its news sources. The Indian landscape for digital privacy is also fertile with vast amounts of data being pilfered, hacked and legally accumulated. If carefully designed election propaganda based on fake news and bots is launched on the eve of the 2019 elections who will protect the pillars of Indian democracy? This qualitative study paper with a triangulation of two methods examines the role of computational propaganda in elections and undertakes to find the likelihood of its replication during the Indian general elections in 2019.

Keywords: Indian elections 2019, computational propaganda, social media, data privacy

Since India is closely connected to the US technology landscape with increasing integration of outsourcing, media interaction, non-resident Indian diaspora, US market-oriented Indian tech companies and the large Indian tech start-up eco-system, any trend in the US can cross-over quite easily. The objective of this paper is to explore whether the digital propaganda techniques used in the Trump campaign can have an influence on future election campaigns in India.

This paper is based on the pioneering and path-breaking research done by Cambridge Psychometrics Centre (Kosinskia, Stillwell & Graepelb, 2013) which showed how easily accessible digital records of behaviour can be used to automatically and accurately predict a range of highly sensitive personal attributes like sexual orientation, ethnicity, religious and political views. With the effect of contagion dynamics in the spread of radicalism in the fast moving world of the social media (Ferrara, 2017), it is not difficult to expect influence of these new tools in the developing world.

After Donald Trump won the US Presidential election, one company, Cambridge Analytica was suspected¹ to be behind the psychological profiling of 230 million Americans and micro-targeted promotions (Gottfried, Jeffrey & Shearer, 2016) for Trump's rallies using social media data, computer learning, and psychometric profiles. Though it was not the first election to use social media², it was a quantum jump in terms of a digital strategy. When the Trump campaign planned events in the traditionally democratic states like Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, many were surprised but did not know that the

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Trump campaign was looking at swing voters based on micro data engagement of voter's Facebook posts (Trump won the three states by slender margins).

For this, Cambridge Analytica is reputed to have developed a model inspired³ by research done at the University of Cambridge (Kosinskia et al., 2013)⁴ in which by correlating Facebook 'Likes' it would be able to build a psychographic profile with up to 80 to 85 per cent accuracy. The propaganda unleashed by the Trump campaign had its origins in this micro data which helped influence opinions at the grassroots (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) and was even related to the fake news (Silverman & Craig, 2016) network spreading on the web (Gottfried & Shearer 2016) widely shared (Silverman, 2016) and even believed by those who read it (Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2016)

Literature Review

The origins of 'Propaganda' can be traced to 1622 when a Committee of Cardinals were constituted by Pope Gregory XV to oversee missionary activity (Marlin, 2002) and over a period of time study of propaganda has drawn perspectives from psychology, sociology, history, and political science. The turning point was World War I, a precursor to the odious tools used in Nazi Germany.

Propaganda is a consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to enterprise, idea or group (Bernays, 2005) and a means of social control or a product of social movement (Lasswell, 1935). It strives for the closed mind (Martin, 1932) and is a deliberate attempt by some individual or group to design, control or alter attitudes a group of people using instruments of communication (Qualter, 1965) and is to Democracy what the Bludgeon is to the Totalitarian State (Chomsky, 2002).

Jacques Ellul was the earliest to study propaganda and defined it under different categories like political propaganda which is carried out by a political body (government, party, a pressure group) sociological when an ideology is spread by means of context like movies, ads and everyday experience (Ellul, 1973). Propaganda can also seek to destroy the government or the established order, may unify and stabilize by getting the individual to participate (Ellul, 1973) and use facts, statistics and graphs to form an impression based on rational data designed by the propagandist (Ellul, 1973).

More than individuals it is the masses that are more susceptible (Bon, 1895) and the impact of such communications on mass hysteria was studied by Hadley Cantril⁵ of course the credibility of which was later questioned⁶ as flawed. So can digital technology really help win elections? The Trump election in US has an eerie parallel to a novel 'The 480' (Burdick, 1964) where a charismatic outsider wins the elections with the help of computer simulation tactics.

The strength of the Trump campaign (Bessi & Ferrara, 2016) complemented the emergence of a giant News Content Eco System. At the peak of the campaign, by mid-2016, the Google search engine was showing strange auto suggestion results and right at the top was "whether Obama was American?", "Did Hilary Clinton run a prostitution racket" and "Did the holocaust really happened?".

Elon University (Albright, 2017) explored the reasons for this strange search engine results phenomenon and came up with a network of 306 fake news sites, 23,000 pages and 1.3 million hyperlinks and they had small 'node' size (Athey & Mobius, 2017) which meant they were linking out to mainstream media and social media networks and not many where sending links back. Each time if a person liked a fake post on Facebook the scripts followed the user around helping in data mining enabling personalized political messages.

The more fake news the user engaged the more it gained traction like for instance a click on a fake story about Hillary's sex-trafficking ring would take you further to Hillary's supposed history of murder and sex trafficking. Recent research has also focused on artificial intelligence that automatically creates YouTube videos about news and current events which reacts to trending topics and spools specific videos based on individual personality traits (Albright, 2016).

Twitter (Woolley, S.C., 2016) and Facebook were on the frontline in US elections. Thousands of bots (literally a robot) were programmed to retweet specific accounts to help popularize specific ideas or viewpoints and respond automatically to Twitter users activated basically through certain keywords or hashtags cannot be underestimated. The replies can be pre-written slurs, insults or threats custom designed to respond to the words (Abokhodair & McDonald, 2015).

High-end bots are analog, operated by real people who mostly assume fake identities and personalities and such people respond to specific issues in conjunction with friends and followers who can coordinate with common attacking viewpoints. They are also far less likely to be deactivated (Khateeb & Agarwal, 2016).

Facebook "dark posts" turned out to be a game changer too, enabling the Trump campaign to attack Clinton with targeted negative ads that flew below the public radar. Unlike a regular Facebook advertisement, which appears on one's timeline and can be seen by one's friends, dark posts are invisible to everyone but the recipient.

Facebook promotes them as "unpublished" posts and these were used by the Trump campaign in more traditional attack ads (Resnick, 2016). Such micro-targeting meant that a voter deemed neurotic might be shown gun-rights commercial featuring burglars breaking into a home ads warning of the dangers posed by the Islamic State could be targeted directly at voters prone to xenophobic panic and anxiety.

Indian Elections in the Future

Social media played a major role in the Lok Sabha Elections 2014 in India which witnessed the rise of the BJP government (Wani, 2015) and it was estimated that in the world's largest electorate Facebook users had an impact in 160 constituencies (IMAI & Iris Foundation, Mumbai, 2013) and the first time voter was almost always a social media user⁷. Major parties in 2014 were also allocating a substantial budget⁸ in a presidential style election campaign (Deshpande & Ghosh, 2015).

Prominent was the multimedia campaign waged by the BJP with innumerable road rallies and holographic projections, personalized mails, robot calls and marketing through number of social media volunteers who were willing to cooperate. Twitter emerged as a key tool for campaigning in the elections and Modi the BJP candidate followers in thirty-eight different languages.

The elections also witnessed revamped new age interactive websites, offline and online campaigns by way of Google Hangouts, WhatsApp, YouTube and even quirky mobile applications. The Indian market may be ripe for unleashing the digital propaganda tools used in US and could well set the stage for contagion dynamics (Ferrara, 2017).

Methodology

The paper follows a triangulation (Huetttman & Elizabeth, 1993) qualitative approach using two methods to find out the 'likelihood' of new computational propaganda techniques being applied during the Indian parliamentary elections in 2019. The inductive content

research aims through repeated examination and comparison analyse the data obtained through (i) In-depth Interviews (ii) Focus group discussion (FGD) on whether 'Respondents agree' that the computational propaganda strategies refined in the US elections will not be used in the Indian Elections 2019.

Methodological triangulation (Jonsen & Jehn, 2009) helps to bridge the gap between the two methods used for research and by overlapping methods and common themes for the same research, the findings is compared to establish the conclusion.

The method of sampling adopted for the IDI and FGD was stratified and the respondents for both drawn from relatively high English news consuming group who access their news through hand held devices. The composition of the sample was equal with 50 per cent from age group of 45 to 79 (elder adult - EA) and 50 per cent of them between ages 15 to 24 (young adult -YA) which constitutes 17.5 per cent and 18.4 per cent of the population of India⁹. The sample group selected was all high consumers of English News from mainstream media and Internet with a high awareness of contemporary new coverage in print and TV sources too.

Participants, Procedures and Analysis

Before the FGD and IDI, all participants were shown a detailed concept presentation of the Trump election campaign, an extract of which is included in the background/conjunction mentioned in this paper. Focus group interviews generally consist of groups of six to twelve participants who discuss certain issues while supervised by a discussion leader (Hüttner & Snippenburg, 1995).

Two groups of 10 participants each were selected and both were drawn from homogeneous age groups (the first group from EA and the second from YA). The FGDs were held during July and August, 2017 and both groups were guided by a discussion leader who reviewed the salient points of the concept presentation before each discussion which lasted from 60 to 90 minutes.

The leader used an open-ended protocol to guide discussion before which informed-consent procedures were explained. At the conclusion, the topics were compiled into categories that were labeled as FGD findings. For the IDI the entire heterogeneous set of participants (both EA and YA) was taken and the qualitative feedback obtained from the articulation of the IDI which was collated and the salient points captured as the IDI findings. Both the findings were triangulated to arrive at the key findings.

Results and Findings

The final results was based on triangulation analysis after considering the feedback and opinions during FGDs and IDIs which revealed a number of key findings related to the respondents perception of the 'Likelihood' of computational propaganda tools being used in India for the Elections 2019.

Finding 1: Descriptions of the threat posed by computational propaganda for Indian Elections 2019

- It is a threat but not a game changing one.
- Now that we know the tools it cannot work again
- Media in India is very powerful and though owned by rich people and corporates, the journalists are free

- Some journalist are too sensational and may highlight the tools used by Digital companies
- Threat of sensational news more in India
- Not sure if using such tools is illegal but Indian law is strong

Finding 2: Digital tools if used will be controlled by the government

- The government will not risk that situation since it can be used against ruling party
- Modi bothered about image so will not risk it
- Tools can be used by both government and opposition
- But tools by BJP will be more effective since they have larger fund resources

Finding 3: Election Commission is very powerful, will be supported by Supreme Court

- The Election Commission has more power than government during elections
- CEC can cancel and hold the elections again
- All bureaucrats have to listen to the CEC
- The government have no role in administration
- Supreme Court is very powerful and can interfere if something goes wrong

Finding 4: The sample under study shows that there is a 'Moderate Likelihood' that digital propaganda strategies will be used in India's 2019 elections but it may not happen now that we know about it.

Finding 5: There is also an opinion that sensational news on TV channels is far more dangerous than Internet fake news.

Finding 6: There is also a higher awareness of the poor credibility of social media new and fake news. However the YA group had poor opinion of the credibility of almost all news sources like print, TV, radio and Internet which is reflecting in the increasing alienation of the youth from mainstream media channels¹⁰.

Finding 7: Both EA and YA groups strongly felt that the Election Commission had a big role to ensure that the democratic process is protected while the younger group felt that both the Election Commission and Supreme Court will ensure the rule of law.

Conclusion

While the sample under study is confident that the 'Likelihood' of computational propaganda in Indian elections is moderate, the risk for India is also based on the poor data protection landscape. Its biggest database from its biometrics-based identity card Aadhar is used by companies for authentication, generating a data trail with the Unique Identification Authority of India.

While the UIDAI cannot¹¹ store the purpose of the authentication, the 'surrounding blocks of information' (Gupta, 2017), can give inferences about personal life data. Public agencies and private companies can also maintain logs and archive them and most public services, banks and telecom companies use the Aadhaar biometrics for authentication for enrolment and benefits¹².

Regulations also allow the UIDAI to retain authentication logs and the requesting entities—both public agencies and private companies—also maintain the logs and then archive them¹³. This is possible due to Aadhaar's Application Programme Interface, allow, by law, user organisations to open up their technology and systems for others to use and there have been many instances of misuse¹⁴.

Unlike the United States, which has strict legal regulations on how the Social Security Number can be used India does not even have a strong regulatory framework for Aadhaar

and the Supreme Court has recently heard an Aadhaar-related case that will adjudicate whether privacy is a fundamental right¹⁵. Data protection and data privacy is available in other forms in the Indian legal system and sectoral regulators¹⁶, but these lag behind the quantum jump that data targeting technologies have taken.

Data protection laws need to be dynamic, constantly expanding and improving to deal with new impediments and hindrances (Saxena, 2017). Such a situation is ripe for exploiting by any digital propaganda company and opens up a case for regulation of internet technology companies as public utility providers¹⁷.

Traditionally internet companies were seen as channels or mediums which could not be held liable for prosecution for transmission of criminal material. But now, new digital techniques are emerging as threats to free speech and civil rights (Rainie, Anderson & Albright, 2017) and many governments have started acting making the web transmission criminal material as punishable¹⁸. Should web technology companies be regulated? Even Zuckerberg once described (Time, 2007) Facebook as a “social utility” saying ‘....some social networks have different goals.....we always emphasize the utility component’.

Finally the main bulwark for the battle for the mind (Taylor, 1995), to prevent the likelihood of digital propaganda techniques from being used in the Indian elections in 2018 could be the Election Commission of India (ECI) which is far more powerful than the Federal Election Commission of US¹⁹ or many other election administration regulators in other countries.

The ECI, a permanent constitutional body, plans and executes the electoral process and under the Article 324 of the Indian Constitution and is responsible for ‘Superintendence, direction and control of elections’. The Election Commission of India is a guardian for fair and free elections and issues a code of conduct that has to be followed.

It regulated and registers parties as well as monitor their budget and expenditure. It can suppress the results of opinion polls and even in case, a candidate is found guilty of corrupt practices during the elections, the Supreme Court and High Courts consult the Commission. The Commission can suspend candidates who fail to submit their election expense accounts timely.

It enjoys exclusive powers (Bansode, 2014) related to (i) Suspending the candidates who fail to submit their election accounts timely (ii) Ordering for re-polls as and when required (iii) Advising on disqualification of members after the elections, if it thinks that they have violated any guidelines and (iv) Have authority over the returning officers, recruited from the government or from local authority. Once the electoral process begins, the entire legal and bureaucratic system comes under the supervision of the ECI and the Indian courts cannot intervene since the Constitution guarantees it.

Recently, the Commission has been coming under attack by the Delhi chief minister calling it a *Dhritarashtra* a reference to a blind partial king from a myth²⁰. In addition a Congress leader Manish Tewari also criticized the EC for toeing the ruling party's line on electronic voting machine. The EC has as a result demanded for the power of contempt of court²¹ by extending the power under the Contempt of Courts Act, 1971 to the EC and its commissioners.

Though the Election Commission enjoys the position of a court of law, it does not have the right to charge people of contempt. But the power of the EC was on display during the recent Rajya Sabha elections with Gujarat state being the focus of action²².

Limitations: This qualitative triangulation study of focus group and in-depth interviews has its limitations (Gelders, Peeraer & Goossens, 2007) which are also due to the sample size. It also cannot be validated in terms of quantitative data analysis and the subject is

dynamic too with the conditions likely to change even as digital technology on the Internet evolves. Many of the findings obtained can be challenged due to these reasons and likely to be dated very soon. But the evolution of the digital world is constant and unrelenting and everyday there are digital experts constantly looking at how new tools can be innovated to influence the consumers.

The evolution is also reflective of how even the concept of the receiver as the reader or viewer is evolving into a customer. No more will media vehicles distinguish between the customer and the reader and that is ominous.

While the flag bearers of freedom of expression fight a daily pitched battle to protect hard won freedom rights there are stronger technological forces that are making the job even more difficult. However, there is a large potential to understand the challenge of digital propaganda on India's relatively illiterate electorate living in data insecure environment through a combination of quantitative analysis and studies of contagion dynamics.

The same exercise and research done by Elon and Kosinskia can be replicated in the Indian context by a larger group of multidisciplinary researchers to tap the landscape of the Indian digital world. This is important because media as a watchdog should be ahead of the curve of Propaganda. Till that the only barrier to the threat of Digital Propaganda would be the robustness of Indian democracy which has triumphed many a time in the past.

Notes

- ¹ Das Magazin, H. Grassegger and M. Krogerus, Cambridge Analytica, a data science firm owned by SCL.
- ² Democrats developed databases – VoteBuilder and Catalyst – had over 240 million voter records of demographic and psychographic information, Singer 2012.
- ³ When Kosinski refused to license his model to Cambridge Analytic which then built its own model and added a database by using Amazon Mechanical Turk (Mattathias Schwartz, The Intercept).
- ⁴ Private traits and attributes are predictable from digital records of human behaviour, Psychometrics Centre, Cambridge Univ. funded by Boeing & Microsoft.
- ⁵ Hadley Cantril, Princeton psychologist, Study on H.G. Wells 'War of the Worlds' a radio adaptation by Orson Welles of an alien invasion of Earth which created panic on the streets with many rushing out of town in their cars to escape doomsday.
- ⁶ W Joseph Campbell, Media Myth Alert, 2009, Cantril may have exaggerated the event selecting the narrow sample.
- ⁷ From 2009 election with hardly any Social Media presence to 93 million and 33 million young Facebook and Twitter users in 2014
- ⁸ Social Media budget allocation of 5% and more by BJP and INC (Rs. 500 crore & Rs. 400 crore), (LAMAI, 2013).
- ⁹ India Census, <http://censusindia.gov.in>
- ¹⁰ Aadhaar (Targeted Delivery of Financial and other Subsidies, Benefits and Services) Act, 2016(TFSBS)
- ¹¹ TFSBS
- ¹² Filing Income Tax Returns and obtaining PAN cards, EPF, free LPG, eNPS accounts, PDS subsidies, train tickets, Passport. Aadhaar Mandatory Stays For Now, Says SC, NDTV, A. Vaidyanathan, June 27, 2017
- ¹³ Reliance Jio, Banks and Microfinance companies Know Your Customer norms.
- ¹⁴ Arrested for selling SIM cards using Aadhar biometric data (Dainik Bhaskar, Feb 2017) websites share demographic data of minors (Srinivas Kodali, Centre for Internet & Society Report, Feb 2017) Bank Agents perform transactions using stored biometrics (SuvidhaInfoserve, Axis Bank Feb 24th)
- ¹⁵ Section 32 under "national security" allows Govt. to access any information without explanation, Supratim & Chowdhury, 2017)
- ¹⁶ RBI, SEBI, IRDA regulators for Monetary, Markets and Insurance sectors.
- ¹⁷ Economist William Baumol,: Natural monopoly is an "industry in which multi-firm production is more costly than production by a monopoly, high market share, provides a vital service, is a natural monopoly and have high barriers consumer's exit.

- ¹⁸ Germany requires social-media platforms to take down hate speech, within 24 hours or face fines of upto €50m, *The Guardian*, Friday 30 June 2017 12.14 BST
- ¹⁹ Federal Election Commission formed by Congress in 1975 to regulate federal campaign spending limits but subsequent Supreme Court decisions have loosened limits, retrieved from [www.washingtonexaminer.com / commissioner-fec-power-grabs-are-the-real-dysfunction/article/2578945](http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/commissioner-fec-power-grabs-are-the-real-dysfunction/article/2578945)
- ²⁰ Need some power to act against wild allegations, *Live Mint*, June 12, 2017
- ²¹ SY Quraishi, *The Wire*, August 3rd, 2017, Will the Modi Government Give the Election Commission More Power So It Is Fully Independent?
- ²² EC order on Gujarat shows its Power, *Hindustan Times*, August 10, 2017.

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